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COMMAND DECISIONS

The German Counteroffensive in the Ardennes

by

Charles V. P. von Luttichau



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CHAPTER 20

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The German counteroffensive through the Ardennes in the winter of 1944, the Battle of the Bulge, will long be recalled in American military annals as having inflicted on the U.S. 12th Army Group the first and only serious reverse it suffered in its sweep from Normandy to the Rhine. The heady optimism of the breakout from Normandy and the pursuit across France into Belgium and Luxembourg in August and September had been dashed by the failure of logistics to keep up with the speed of pursuit and the unexpectedly stubborn resistance of the Germans as they fell back on their West Wall. But in November General Eisenhower, believing that he now had available the strength to disregard unfavorable weather and the approach of winter, directed Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley to launch the U.S. 12th Army Group on an offensive north and south of the Ardennes with the Rhine as its objective. In December the First U.S. Army was attacking east of Aachen toward the Roer, and Lt. Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army, south of the Ardennes, was punching its way toward the Saar. Counting on the defensive strength of the terrain, General Bradley was holding his line in the Ardennes with minimum forces.

On 16 December the Germans crashed through these with a massive counteroffensive. It came as a complete surprise, created widespread if momentary consternation, halted the Allied offensive, and cost the Americans and British over 70,000 casualties before they could contain it.¹

¹ The planning and preparations of the German Ardennes offensive are described in detail in Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes*, a volume in preparation for UNITED STATES ARMY IN WORLD WAR II. Other volumes in this series covering related operations

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The German decision to launch an offensive in the Ardennes was Hitler's. It was a decision in which the Chief of State, acting as Commander in Chief of the Wehrmacht, overrode the judgment of his military advisers. Hitler was the originator of the idea. He was the driving force behind the astounding feat of assembling the necessary forces. He came to the west in person to supervise the preparations and direct the operation. He personally prescribed the ambitious objectives and attached the extravagant hopes to a victorious outcome that converted an otherwise strictly tactical operation into a fateful strategic decision.²

The late hour of the war and the fact that Hitler was committing Germany's last reserves in men and resources gave the venture a character of finality and grave political significance. In Hitler's own words, the outcome of the battle would spell either life or death for the German nation. Over the years the Fuehrer had come to identify his person with the German people and their destiny. Seen in this light the Ardennes was a battle for Hitler's survival and that of the Nazi regime. If the events to be recounted seem to defy military logic, it was, in part, because the founder of a Reich that was to last a thousand years was a fanatic whose intuition had long since triumphed over sound reasoning.

The Background

In the middle of September 1944 Hitler startled his closest advisers with the announcement that he would launch a large-scale offensive through the Ardennes in November. The decision was not a sudden inspiration. Indeed, the origins of the idea for a counteroffensive can be traced as far back as the end of July when Hitler was more immediately concerned with the aftermath of the 20 July con-

and events are: Forrest C. Pogue, *The Supreme Command* (Washington, 1954), especially Chapter XX; Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, and Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign* (both in preparation); Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign* (Washington, 1950).

Reference is made below to monographs (in the R-Series) dealing with special aspects of German operations in World War II. The R-Series monographs are historical studies based on German captured documents and additional information obtained from high-ranking German participants in the events described. These manuscripts are written in support of volumes in UNITED STATES ARMY IN WORLD WAR II and are in OCMH files.

² (1) Minutes of Conference of 31 July 1944: *Besprechung des Fuehrers mit Generaloberst Jodl am 31. 7. 1944 in der Wolfsschanze* (near Rastenburg, East Prussia). (2) *OKW/WFSt* (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab—Armed Forces High Command/Armed Forces Operations Staff*) *Kriegstagebuch* (War Diary, abbreviated *KTB*), *Ausarbeitung, Der Westen*, I. IV.-16., XII. 44, referred to hereafter as *Der Westen* (Schramm). Maj. Percy E. Schramm, keeper of the *WFSt* War Diary wrote this draft war diary from records and daily notes made at OKW headquarters.

spiracy that had culminated in the well-known attempt on his life at the Fuehrer's East Prussian headquarters and with plans to counteract the Allied breakthrough at Avranches. A succession of abortive attempts to turn the tide and stop the Allied advance across France by counterattacking at Mortain and later in Alsace appeared to have merely confirmed Hitler in his determination to inflict upon the Western Allies a crushing defeat that would influence in his favor the final outcome of the war.³

The plan for the big counteroffensive took shape during a period of internal insecurity and catastrophic Axis defeats on the fronts in the East and West.

In the East the Soviet summer offensive had driven in one sweep from the Dnieper to the gates of Warsaw and the banks of the Vistula, had isolated—temporarily—an army group in the Baltic States, and had brought the Russians within reach of the German homeland. Here their spectacular advance, having outrun its supplies, ground to a halt. In the Balkans, the Russians had occupied Rumania, then Bulgaria, and continued an almost unopposed advance toward Hungary. This movement threatened to cut off the German forces in Greece, Albania, and Yugoslavia, and force Hitler to order the evacuation of the first two of these occupied countries.

In Italy the Germans had fallen back to the Gothic Line, last transpeninsular defense position short of the Po Valley. In the far north the capitulation of Finland had rendered untenable the advanced German positions in the Scandinavian theater of operations.

The catastrophes in the East were matched, if not surpassed, by the dangers in the West. By mid-September the Allies had liberated most of France, Belgium, and Luxembourg and were threatening the all-important Ruhr area, the industrial heart of Germany. They had also captured the vital harbor of Antwerp, a strategic objective of whose importance for the conduct of future operations both Eisenhower and Hitler were equally convinced. To meet the mounting crisis in the West, Hitler had recalled from temporary retirement Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, charging him with the defense of the western approaches to the Reich. Rundstedt achieved what seemed impossi-

³ The exact date when Hitler made his startling announcement was Sunday, 16 September, during a situation conference with his top advisers. A detailed account of the meeting is contained in the personal diary of the Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe, General Werner Kreipe, in OCMH files as MS # P-069 (Kreipe). See also Hitler—Jodl Conference, 31 Jul 44, cited above, n. 2. Measures taken to implement the decision to launch a large-scale counteroffensive were, among others, the constitution of the *Sixth Panzer Army* (Sepp Dietrich) ordered on 6 September 1944. For details on the origin of the idea and the course of events leading up to the Ardennes offensive see MS # R-9, *The Idea for the German Ardennes Offensive in 1944*, by Magna E. Bauer.

ble: with their backs to the imaginary safety of the Siegfried Line, the armies in the West once more formed a coherent defense line, taut and precariously thin, but strong enough to frustrate the daring Allied bid (Operation MARKET-GARDEN) to jump the formidable obstacles of the lower Meuse and Rhine.

Within three months, the Wehrmacht had lost in battle 50 divisions in the East and another 28 in the West, an appalling total of 78 divisions, or one and a half million men, and an area several times as big as Germany.⁴

Goering's once powerful Luftwaffe had ceased to be a factor that could influence decisively the outcome of the struggle. At this stage of the war the Luftwaffe had to all purposes shot its bolt. Outclassed by Allied air, short of trained personnel and fuel, incapable of replacing mounting losses, the German Air Force had fallen into disgrace in Hitler's eyes. Recalling Hermann Goering's boastful prewar remarks that his fighters would sweep enemy intruders out of the skies, the people sarcastically referred to Allied bomber formations penetrating the heart of the Reich almost without challenge as "Parteitag Fluege" (demonstration flights staged by the Luftwaffe for the prewar Nazi Party congresses at Nuremberg). So paralyzed was this once imposing sword of the German blitz campaigns that it could not even prevent the ever-increasing bombardments of vital synthetic fuel plants.⁵ Yet the offensive spirit of the German fighter arm under its able commander General Adolf Galland had not been broken. Indeed, during the worst setbacks Galland was busy assembling a last reserve of pilots and planes to strike a potentially decisive blow at Allied air. Suicidal as the plan for this large-scale operation against Allied daylight bombers may have been, it might well have brought startling results had Hitler accepted it; but he did not. And thus one of the most daring operations planned in World War II never came to a full-blown test.⁶

Analogously the Navy had lost its former important position. As the Luftwaffe was reduced to abstemious use of its fighter arm, so was the German Navy regarding its U-boats. After the Allies had captured or sealed off all submarine bases in France, the remaining ones nearer

⁴ MS # R-19, Germany's Situation in the Fall of 1944, Part III, The Military Situation, by Charles V. P. von Luttichau.

⁵ (1) U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. The Over-all Report (European War), September 30, 1945, and The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945. (2) For additional information see MS # R-25, Germany's Situation in the Fall of 1944, Part II, The Economic Situation, by Charles V. P. von Luttichau.

⁶ (1) *The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force (1933-1945)*, issued by the Air Ministry (London, 1948), pp. 370-73. (2) Adolf Galland, *Die Ersten und die Letzten* (Darmstadt: Franz Schneekluth, 1953). (3) Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), pp. 442-44.

the Reich had become more vulnerable. The rapid advance of the Soviet armies along the shores of the Baltic Sea threatened to deprive the Navy of the training waters that Admiral Karl Doenitz considered essential to break in the revolutionary new U-boats now under construction in German shipyards. Only with these faster, snorkel-equipped submarines could he hope to resume the U-boat offensive that had once threatened to destroy the tenuous communication lines of Allied global warfare. So vital appeared the retention of control of the Baltic Sea coast to Doenitz that he persuaded Hitler, against the sound advice of the Army's Chief of Staff, to hold on to this northern sector of the Eastern front at the extreme risk of strategic breakthrough in the weakened center to the heart of Germany.⁷

The burden of defending Hitler's *Festung Europa* thus had to be shouldered by the Army. As Napoleon I said, an army marches on its stomach, but in modern warfare the "stomach" had grown to include the resources and productive capacity of the nation. Vast areas that so far had supplied the German war machine with essential raw materials had now been recaptured by the Allies. It was obvious, even to Hitler, that Germany could not continue the struggle indefinitely. Under the direction of Albert Speer German production experienced a tremendous growth despite stepped-up Allied bombings. In September of 1944 the economy still profited from the peak production level reached during the summer. Yet accumulated stocks, effective dispersion of industries, and a radical curtailment of civilian needs could assure continued adequate supply of the armed forces for only about six more months. Estimates for a longer lease on life were unrealistic. In September the breakdown of transportation, which later was to deprive the German high command of the advantage of interior lines, was still a dreaded specter. Not until the end of the year did the paralysis of railroad communications hit an already collapsing economy. While the transportation crisis was still a matter of the future, the fuel oil drought was a present reality. It had contributed decisively to the grounding of the Luftwaffe. Now it threatened to immobilize the Army. To supply Hitler's final offensive in the West with fuel, the meager allotments to all other theaters of operations had to be cut below the minimum subsistence levels. With this decision Hitler incurred the grave risk of depriving already inadequate armored re-

⁷ (1) Minutes of Conferences of the Commander in Chief, Navy, with Hitler, 1-3 Jan 44, 9 Jul 44, 19 Jan 45, in Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing with the German Navy 1944 and 1945, in OCMH files. (2) Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe*, pp. 147, 151-52, 617-20. (3) Heinz Guderian, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten* (Heidelberg: Kurt Vowinckel, 1951) pp. 320, 322, and 341ff.; the English edition is called *Panzer Leader* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1952). Subsequent references are to the German edition.

serves, especially on the Eastern front, of their ability to maneuver in the event of large-scale attack.⁸

The abortive 20 July uprising of the German underground affected the Ardennes decision in two ways:

(1) The failure of the attempt confirmed Hitler in his obsession that he was the leader chosen by "Providence" for his mission and gave him the opportunity to break all opposition within Germany and establish complete control over the nation via the Gestapo and the Party.

(2) He reacted to it by immediately putting into effect a series of drastic "Total War" measures, designed to supply him with additional forces for a final counteroffensive. By lowering the draft age to 16 years and extending it to include the 50-year-olds and by combing out the home front and armed forces, he put an additional three quarters of a million men under arms. He thus built up a new strategic reserve consisting of 25 *Volks grenadier* divisions and at least 6 panzer divisions. These were raised and trained under the newly appointed commander of the Replacement Army, Gestapo Chief Heinrich Himmler. In addition, a great number of artillery, *Werfer* (rocket projectors), and armored units were being formed, thus theoretically creating a very flexible instrument in the hands of a capable supreme commander.⁹

In October the Germans once more achieved stabilization of the fronts in the main theaters of operation. Even in the Balkans and Hungary, where the Russians continued their advance, German resistance was stiffening. By scraping the bottom of the barrel, the German economy and war machine appeared capable of mounting one final large-scale offensive. It was now up to Hitler to decide where to launch it.

Strategic and Tactical Considerations Influencing the Decision

After the defeats of the summer of 1944, the remaining German war potential was so seriously reduced that Hitler might have concluded that he no longer could win the war and should seek an armistice. Germany's allies—Japan, Italy, and Finland—had undertaken, late in 1942, to induce Hitler to seek an agreement with the

⁸ (1) Sources cited n. 5(1). (2) Guderian, *op. cit.*, pp. 341ff. (3) For more detail see MS # R-25.

⁹ (1) *KTB, GenStdH/Org Abt (General Staff of the Army/Organization Division)*, 13 Jun-31 Aug 44. (2) For more detail see MS # R-12, *The Ardennes Offensive, Planning and Preparations*, Ch. I, *The Preliminary Planning*, by Charles V. P. von Luttichau. (3) *Der Westen* (Schramm), Chapter *Die Vorbereitungen einer eigenen Offensive zwischen Monschau und Echternach*.

Soviet Union. The Japanese continued such efforts to the day when Hitler appears to have made the decision to attack in the Ardennes. Late in 1943, Hitler himself is reported to have sounded out the Western Allies for a definition of the unconditional surrender formula. But Allied insistence upon these terms before and after the 20 July 1944 plot all but ruled out the possibility of ending the war by negotiation.¹⁰

Unconditional surrender would have been difficult even for a German democratic government after a successful overthrow of Hitler's dictatorship. Certainly the "greatest captain of all times," as the Fuehrer liked to be referred to, was the last person to admit that Germany's situation was hopeless. Even after the Ardennes offensive had failed, Hitler, on 28 December, addressing the generals who were to lead a subsidiary attack in Alsace, pointed out that the war was an ideological conflict that could end only in Germany's victory or extinction. "By no means," he said, "am I entertaining the thought that the war could be lost. I have never in my life known the term 'capitulation.' . . ." ¹¹

If capitulation was wholly unacceptable to him, Hitler could only pursue the alternative of continuing the war in the vague hope that the unfavorable course of events could be eventually reversed by determination, perseverance, and time. Arguing that a period of grave military defeats was inopportune for political decisions, he resolved to "continue this struggle until, as Frederick the Great said, one of our 'damned enemies give up.' Only then shall we get a peace that will guarantee the future existence of the German nation." ¹²

After the period of victorious blitz campaigns had ended in the disastrous defeats in Stalingrad and Tunisia in 1943, Hitler's exuberant optimism changed to the almost mesmeric belief that he could be the winner of a long drawn-out struggle in which one of his enemies would weary and give up. Only the fittest would win in this struggle for survival and unless the German people could qualify they deserved

¹⁰ (1) Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), Vol. II, pp. 1,573-74. (2) Franz Von Papen, *Der Wahrheit eine Gasse* (Muenchen: Paul List, 1952) p. 585. (The English edition was published by Andre Deutsch, London, 1952.) (3) For additional information see MS # R-27, Germany's Situation in the Fall of 1944, Part I, The Political Situation, by Charles V. P. von Lutichau.

¹¹ Hitler addressing commanding generals before the Operation NORDWIND, 28 Dec 44, Fragment No. 27, in collection known as *Conferences Between Hitler and Members of the German Armed Forces High Command, December 1942-March 1945*, referred to hereafter as *Minutes of Hitler Conferences*.

¹² Conference Between Hitler and Generalleutnant Siegfried Westphal and Generalleutnant Hans Krebs, 31 Aug 44, Fragment No. 46, in *Minutes of Hitler Conferences*.

extinction. Toward the end of the war this nihilistic attitude completely overshadowed all his plans and decisions.¹³

Forced into the defense on all fronts, Hitler still refused to subscribe to a purely defensive strategy and continued to think in terms of an offensive. Like Clausewitz, he maintained that offense is the best defense. But at the same time he violated the principle that successful defense requires preservation of strength, which in turn is possible only if space can be traded for time. In 1944 Hitler was fast running out of both. This consideration, perhaps, precipitated the decision to attack in the Ardennes, for to persist in the "rot of barren defense" (to use Hitler's words) would merely aggravate Germany's position, a statement General Alfred Jodl amplified: "We could not hope to escape the evil fate hanging over us. By fighting, rather than waiting, we might save something."¹⁴

Once Hitler had made the decision to go over to the offensive at any cost, he had to decide next whether to wait until he could throw into an all-out effort the whole remaining war potential of the nation and its Wehrmacht. This course of action, proposed in separate plans to Hitler by military and civilian advisers, amounted to a radical revision of strategy. The offensive would have carried the punch of the combined forces of total mobilization of Germany's economy and armed might with a grand effort of the Luftwaffe's fighter arm concentrated around a core of the dreaded jet planes now ready in limited numbers and steadily multiplying. The next offensive strategy would have confronted the Allies with a danger that they feared.

This alternative to an immediate throw of the dice was the essence of a plan advanced by the Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff, General Jodl and his deputy, General Horst von Buttlar-Brandenfels. They proposed to: (1) shift the main effort of the war to the West; (2) redeploy a considerable number of divisions from Scandinavia and Italy, authorizing large-scale withdrawals on these fronts; (3) transfer the bulk of Navy and Luftwaffe personnel to the Army; (4) convert the entire replacement army (about two million men), including all training units, into combat divisions; (5) totally mobilize all German resources far beyond the measures adopted in the July crisis; and (6) turn Germany into a fortress under martial law.¹⁵

¹³ *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg 14 November 1945-1 October 1946*, (Nuremberg, 1948), Vol. XVI, p. 498.

¹⁴ (1) ETHINT 50 (Jodl), in OCMH files. (2) Fragment No. 27, cited above, n. 11. (3) Hitler addressing commanding generals before the Ardennes offensive, 12 Dec 44, Fragment No. 28, in *Minutes of Hitler Conferences*.

¹⁵ (1) MS # T-122, *The History of OB WEST* (Commander in Chief West) (Generalleutnant Bodo Zimmermann *et al.*), Section D, pp. 329ff. This section was written by General von Buttlar and gives an account of the development of the plan for the Ardennes offensive. (2) MS # P-32i, Ardennes Project, Questionnaire No. 1 (General der Infanterie Hans von Greiffenberg *et al.*).

To supplement such a course of action Hitler might have accepted the separate proposal submitted by War Production Minister Albert Speer and General Galland: to strike a devastating blow at Allied daylight bombers with the massed strength of 2,500 fighters (including the jets) trained and assembled expressly for that purpose. Their estimate was that 400 to 500 Allied bombers could thus be destroyed for the loss of an equal number of German fighters and that an air victory of such proportions would break the stranglehold of the air blockade.¹⁶

While there can be no doubt that adoption of these proposals in combination and their application in a great ground and air offensive could not have prevented the final collapse of Germany, their effect on Allied strategy would have been grave. But Hitler was perhaps too apprehensive, certainly too impatient, to adopt this radical solution. He had never fully grasped the significance of air power, even during the early phase of the war when the Luftwaffe was victorious in the East and West. Now, as the conflict entered the sixth year, the decline of Goering's Luftwaffe had been painfully demonstrated. Hitler was disillusioned and distrustful of his air force's capacity to deliver the stroke Speer and Galland proposed and frustrated the plan even before it could be tested. Nor did the Jodl-Buttlar-Brandenfels proposal appeal to Hitler at this time. Six months later, after the Russian armies had penetrated the heart of the Reich, he was finally ready to apply extreme measures, but in the fall of 1944 Hitler was evidently unwilling to admit that the seriousness of the situation called for such a radical course. There is evidence that Hitler considered withdrawing troops from the northern and southern theaters of war, even to the extent of pulling back behind the Alps and giving up Italy altogether in order to redeploy these divisions in the west. But this was at the end of July, at the height of the crisis in Normandy, and the thought then tentatively weighed was subsequently allowed to die.¹⁷

In rejecting the radical proposals for an all-out offensive, Hitler thus settled for a strategic compromise.

The question now arose as to where to launch the offensive on which he had decided. Initially Hitler's military advisers explored all theaters of operations for possibilities. But the criterion that the offensive must gain a decisive success automatically reduced the choice to the theaters in the East and West.¹⁸

General Guderian, responsible for operations on the Eastern Front,

¹⁶ See sources cited n. 6, above.

¹⁷ Hitler Conference, 31 Jul 44, cited above, n. 2.

¹⁸ (1) See n. 15(1), above. (2) *Der Westen* (Schramm).

continually urged that the strategic reserve be sent to his theater to thwart any Soviet attempt to invade the German homeland. In October Guderian's fears were vividly illustrated by Soviet drives that cut off an army group in the Courland peninsula and penetrated the East Prussia defenses. During the same period the Russians had captured Belgrade and crossed the natural barrier of the Danube on a wide front. By Christmas they encircled Budapest and threatened Vienna. But Hitler refused to listen to the counsel of the Army's Chief of Staff and ridiculed intelligence estimates of Soviet strength and capabilities.¹⁹

In the beginning of August Hitler and his staff actually considered a carefully prepared operation in the East, while planning to fight a defensive battle with their backs to the Siegfried Line. These plans were based upon the assumption that the withdrawal from France could be effected gradually with successive stands to be made along prepared defense positions well ahead of the West Wall. After a victory over the Russians, the forces could then be shifted to the West with a view to repeating the exploit against the Western Allies. This hope faded rapidly as the Allied armies swept relentlessly across France driving the remnants of the German armies in the West before them. Concurrently the high-level planners realized that the Soviet Union's apparently inexhaustible manpower reserves and its advantage of unlimited terrain would frustrate German efforts to gain a strategic decision in the East.²⁰

Explaining his position after the war, General Jodl stated that the attack had to be launched "in the West because the Russians had so many troops that even if we had succeeded in destroying thirty divisions it would have made no difference. On the other hand, if we destroyed thirty divisions in the West, it would amount to more than one third of the whole invasion army."²¹ Actually this would have been almost one half of the Allied Expeditionary Force.

This consideration tipped the scales in favor of the West and coincided with Hitler's firm conviction that Germany's fate would be decided there. The geographical limits of the area—as compared to the endlessness of the USSR—and the far smaller number of Allied units would give him the chance he was seeking. A major factor in this connection was Hitler's view that the leadership of the West would waver under the impact of a massive crisis, and that public opinion, especially in the United States, would demand a withdrawal from Europe.²²

¹⁹ MS # R-19, cited above, n. 4.

²⁰ See sources cited n. 15, above.

²¹ ETHINT 50 (Jodl).

²² See sources cited n. 15, above.

Once the theater had been determined, the Armed Forces Operations Staff planners investigated feasible courses of action, bearing in mind Hitler's strategic objectives, available German forces (amounting to thirty divisions), and Allied strength and capabilities. An important factor was the realization that Allied control of the air could not be broken by the Luftwaffe and had to be countered by other means.

Hitler specified the prerequisites that would ensure success: (1) holding the positions in the West against all Allied breakthrough attempts without committing the forces being assembled for the big offensive; (2) achieving complete tactical surprise; (3) a period of bad weather extending for at least ten days to keep Allied air grounded during the initial phase of the operation; (4) speedy exploitation of the breakthrough; (5) a relatively quiet period on other fronts, especially in the East.²³

German intelligence methodically evaluated Allied strength and capabilities. In September the Germans estimated that General Eisenhower's forces in France numbered sixty divisions with five more to be shipped to the Continent in October. It was a slight consolation to the German planners that their intelligence had failed to turn up any strategic reserves available to the Supreme Commander at this time. Allied main effort sectors were recognized in the Aachen area, where the Allies were expected to aim at closing to the Rhine on a broad front north of Cologne, and at Metz, where the objective was evidently the Saar Basin. Despite a relative shortage of ammunition, the Germans credited the Allied armies with the capability of launching and sustaining large-scale offensives. The numerical strength ratio between Allied and German forces was estimated at two to one. While Navy intelligence was still fearful of an amphibious landing in the area of the Ems estuary, Army intelligence discounted this possibility as well as that of a repetition of an airborne landing similar to the one launched at Arnhem.²⁴

On the basis of these considerations the Germans weighed five possible courses of action to realize Hitler's intention: (1) *Operation Holland*, consisting of a single-thrust attack to be launched from the bridgehead of Venlo with the objective Antwerp; (2) *Operation Liège-Aachen*, a double envelopment with the main effort originating in the area of northern Luxembourg, driving through the Ardennes in a northwesterly direction, then turning north to meet a secondary attack launched simultaneously from the area northwest of Aachen with the objective of destroying the Allied forces in that salient; (3) *Operation Luxembourg*,

²³ MS # R-12, cited above, n. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

a two-pronged attack from central Luxembourg and the area of Metz with the objective Longvy; (4) *Operation Lorraine*; and (5) *Operation Alsace*, envelopment operations aimed at gaining Nancy and Vesoul, respectively.

The range of choice was soon reduced to the first two solutions because they offered the best prospect of a decisive success. From a strategic point of view *Operation Holland* was very tempting, but was recognized to contain an element of grave risk. The second course, *Liège-Aachen*, which was later to become known as the "small solution," appeared more likely to succeed.²⁵

Faced with these two alternatives, Hitler reached the momentous decision of combining them in what von Runstedt, student of von Schlieffen, sarcastically characterized as an operational idea that could "almost" be called a stroke of genius. With this "big solution," however, Hitler gave the offensive two objectives to be attained with a force adequate only for one.

Some of the reasons behind this decision were tactical, others were psychological and find their explanation only in Hitler's personality. The tactical considerations that he regarded as favorable were: (1) the opportunity to slice through the Allied front along its national seam, thus adding to expected military crisis the cumulative effect of anticipated political disunion; (2) the strategic and psychological importance of Antwerp, seemingly within reach of a bold thrust, if speedily executed; (3) the weakness of the Allied dispositions in the Ardennes sector inviting repetition of the classic breakthrough victories in 1914 and 1940; and (4) the suitability of the wooded Eifel for concealing a large-scale build-up and achieving surprise. Hitler had persuaded himself that he could assemble an adequate force to execute the offensive. He was determined to carry out the operation in the face of powerful Allied attacks astride Metz and the imminent thrust toward the Ruhr district. Distasteful as it was to him to give up valuable terrain and laboriously build defense positions, Hitler was willing to sacrifice both if he could thus hold intact the attack forces he was concentrating. A dangerously grave element in the structure of Hitler's consideration was the gross underestimation of Allied strength and determination and, conversely, an exaggerated overrating of the power and effectiveness of his own forces, especially the elite SS panzer divisions.²⁶ The overriding psychological incitement, however, for

²⁵ (1) *Ibid.* (2) *Der Westen* (Schramm), p. 259. (3) See sources cited n. 15, above.

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of Hitler's reasoning, see (1) MS # R-12, cited above, n. 9; (2) MS # R-13, *The Ardennes Offensive, Planning and Preparations*, Ch. II, *The Framework for the Operation WACHT AM RHEIN*, by Charles V. P. von Luttichau.

undertaking the venture of a great counteroffensive was Hitler's recurring delusion that his military genius would permit him to regain the initiative and decisively alter the course of the war.²⁷

Proponents of the "small solution" (the *Liège-Aachen* operation), mainly Field Marshals von Rundstedt and Walter Model, based their objections to Hitler's concept on the following considerations: (1) the paucity of forces available for an objective so ambitious; (2) the serious lack of reserves to hold the shoulders and feed the offensive; (3) the uncertainty that the forces Hitler had promised could be held in reserve until the start of the offensive, in view of the impending resumption of Allied attacks; and (4) the conviction that the offensive, as planned by Hitler, would result only in a bulge in the German lines and not in the destruction of sizable Allied forces.²⁸

Hitler categorically rejected all pleas in favor of the "small solution," and in his operation directive of 10 November marked the distant objective of Antwerp and even the disposition of the attack forces as "unalterable." To get what he wanted, he freely disregarded the counsel of his advisers and commanders, staking everything on what General Jodl later called "an act of desperation."²⁹

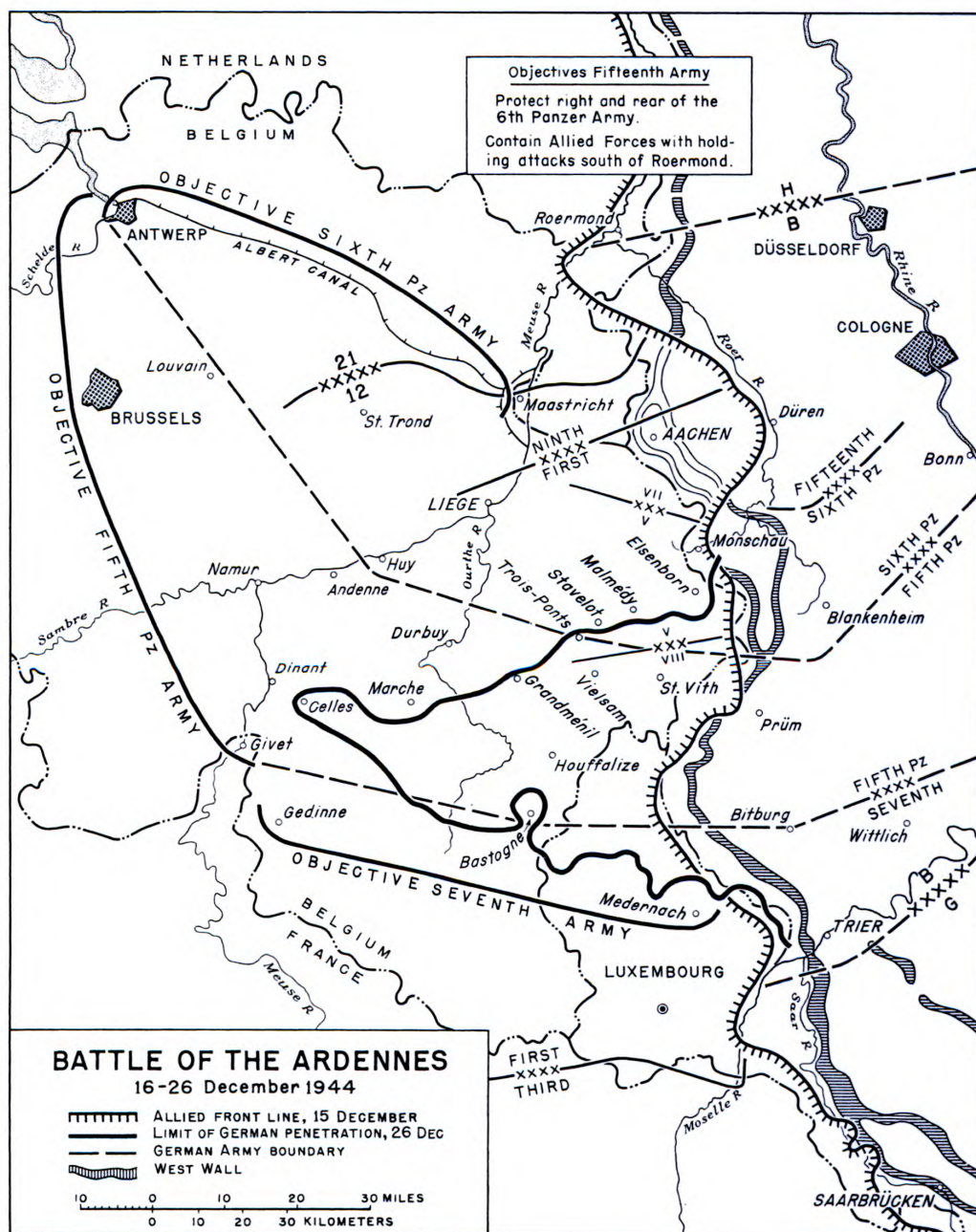
The mission of the operation, decreed by Hitler, was "to destroy the enemy forces north of the line Antwerp-Brussels-Luxembourg, thus to achieve a decisive turn of the Campaign in the West, and possibly of the entire war." (*See Map 10.*) The Commander in Chief West (von Rundstedt) was ordered to break through the weakly held front of the U.S. First Army between Monschau and Wasserbillig with *Army Group B* (Model), cross the Meuse between Liège and Dinant, seize Antwerp and the western bank of the Schelde estuary, and destroy the Allied forces thus cut off from their lines of supply, and, in conjunction with this main attack, launch strong elements of the adjoining *Army Group H* in a supporting attack from the north.

In the main attack with Field Marshal Model's *Army Group B*, the *Sixth Panzer Army* (with four armored and four infantry divisions) was to break through the Allied front north of the Schnee Eifel, seize undestroyed Meuse crossings astride Liège in co-operation with the *150th Panzer Brigade* (SS Col. Otto Skorzeny, famed for his exploit of having freed Mussolini), and subsequently close to the Albert Canal between Maastricht and Antwerp (inclusive). To cover its right (northern) flank, the panzer army would seize and hold defense positions

²⁷ (1) Operation Directive, *WACHT AM RHEIN*, 10 Nov 44, by Hitler, in *OB WEST, KTB Anlage 50*, 1 Jul-31 Dec 44, Vol. I, pp. 95-104. (2) *ETHINT 50* (Jodl).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ (1) *ETHINT 50* (Jodl). (2) MS # P-032i (Greiffenberg *et al.*). The comments by Albert Speer bear out the fact that Hitler was fully aware of the desperate gamble he had undertaken.



MAP 10

R Johnstone

along the Vesdre River with the bulk of its infantry divisions and artillery.

Army Group B's center force, the *Fifth Panzer Army* (with four armored and four infantry divisions), was to use as its main axis of advance the road Bastogne–Namur, break through the Allied front in northern Luxembourg, and cross the Meuse between Amay and Namur. Advanced elements were to rush into the area around Brussels and that west of Antwerp to protect the *Sixth Panzer Army's* open western flank on the line Antwerp–Brussels–Dinant. To fulfill this task, the *Fifth Panzer Army* would stay abreast of its right neighbor—the *Sixth Panzer Army*—and disregard its own extended left flank.

The *Seventh Army* (with one armored and five infantry divisions) was given the task of protecting the southern and southwestern flank of the operation and gaining defense positions starting south of Dinant along the Semois River and ending astride Luxembourg City. This army's forceful advance was to gain the time and terrain essential to build up strong defense positions farther to the rear.

In a supporting attack from the north, the *Fifteenth Army*—reassigned for the offensive from *Army Group H* to *Army Group B*—had a dual mission. With three armored and six infantry divisions it was to launch holding attacks between Roermond and Eupen to tie down Allied forces in that sector and ultimately destroy them in a secondary attack. In addition, the *Fifteenth Army* had the task of assuming control over those units of the *Sixth Panzer Army* committed in the defensive position along the Vesdre River, after the mobile elements of the *Sixth Panzer Army* had crossed the Meuse.

The reserve was reckoned at three armored and four infantry divisions.

Hitler directed von Runstedt to complete the concentration by the end of November—a date dictated by weather forecasts. The necessary fuel (four million gallons) and ammunition (fifty trainloads from the sacrosanct Fuehrer reserve), above and beyond the current needs of the theater, were promised. The Luftwaffe, Hitler assured his commanders, would support the attack of the ground forces with 1,500 fighters including 100 jets.³⁰

This was Hitler's original concept put into a directive. Except for the number and effective strength of units, it remained virtually unchanged until the offensive began on the morning of 16 December 1944.

On the eve of his offensive Hitler could point with satisfaction to the fulfillment of the basic prerequisites he had specified when he had

³⁰ See sources cited n. 27, above.

ordered the attack. The Western Front had withstood Allied breakthrough attempts at Aachen and in Lorraine, although nine panzer and an equal number of infantry divisions had been drawn into battle and suffered in varying degrees. Secrecy had been preserved, the weather was favorable, and the front in the East except for the sector in Hungary had remained relatively quiet. A tremendous effort had gone into the planning and preparations for Germany's last offensive. As the grenadiers and panzers moved into their jump-off positions, expectation was high, and success appeared within close reach.

The Consequences of the Ardennes Decision

Almost immediately the operation fell short of the high hopes that had been attached to it. On the third day Hitler canceled the subsidiary attack of the *Fifteenth Army* and thus altered the tactical concept of the operation. The double envelopment was thus reduced to a far less effective single thrust. On the fourth day it was evident that the powerful *Sixth Panzer Army* would be unable to break through the Allied lines and that the distant objective of Antwerp could not be reached. After one week had passed, even the prospect of closing to the Meuse had faded. When General Patton's armor broke through to Bastogne on 26 December the battle was reduced to a fight for that city, and it was clear that the offensive had failed altogether.³¹

For the Germans the Ardennes did not officially end until 28 January, when Field Marshal Model's armies had been forced back to their original jump-off positions. They could claim to have drawn into the battle 29 U.S. and 4 British divisions and to have inflicted on them about 75,000 casualties.³² The offensive had achieved a temporary respite though Hitler now referred to it as "a tremendous easing of the situation."³³ The Allies had been forced to abandon their attacks on the Roer dams and the Saar, and to delay their final offensive toward the Rhine River for two months. But even Hitler had to admit that it had not gained "the decisive success that might have been expected."³⁴ For this modest achievement, compared to the ambitious aim, Hitler had paid an exorbitant price. Exact figures are not available, but reliable estimates indicate that German casualties were in the neighborhood of 100,000 men (about one third of the attacking

³¹ For the various dates when the Ardennes offensive was considered to have failed, see MSS # R-11 and R-15, *Key Dates During the Ardennes Offensive 1944*, Parts I and II, by Magna E. Bauer and Charles V. P. von Luttichau.

³² Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, pp. 396-97.

³³ Fragment No. 27, 28 Dec 44, in *Minutes of Hitler Conferences*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

force); at least 800 tanks (out of over 2,000 employed); and about 1,000 planes (about half of the total fighter force assembled, including almost 300 lost in the "Big Strike" against Allied ground installations delivered on 2 January 1945).³⁵

These losses were irreplaceable. They left the Western theater of operations with no appreciable fuel reserves. Ammunition stockpiles were down to one third of estimated needs. Replacements for the casualties suffered could no longer be expected. The Ardennes had hurt the Allies, but, in the words of von Runstedt's historian, it had literally "broken the backbone of the (German) western front."³⁶

Long before the official end of the offensive in the West, the full impact of the strategic consequences of the Ardennes was felt in the East. The weakness of the 1,500-mile Eastern Front is best illustrated by the fact that almost half of the German divisions were either isolated in the north (on the Courland peninsula in Latvia) or tied down in the south (in Hungary) without a chance to influence the outcome of the impending battle in the center. When the Russians struck on 12 January 1945, it was too late for remedial measures. The reinforcements and supplies that for the past four months had consistently gone to the West and into the Ardennes had been spent in the short-lived Battle of the Bulge, while the Russians gained an awesome bulge of far greater permanence. They swept across Poland, captured almost all of East Prussia, drove deep into Silesia, and, finally, came to a halt less than fifty miles short of Berlin. Hitler's desperate gamble in the West had invited disaster in the East and hastened the final and inevitable defeat of Germany.

³⁵ For discussion of German losses see MS # R-60, *The Cost of the Ardennes Offensive*, by Magna E. Bauer.

³⁶ MS # T-122 (Zimmermann *et al.*).

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